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ITALIAN LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE EFFORTS IN THE UNITED STATES AND
THE TEACHER OF ITALIAN IN AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES.
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A STRONG INFLUENCE ON THE NATURE OF ITALIAN INSTRUCTION TODAY IN THE UNITED STATES IS THE FACT THAT ITALO-AMERICANS SHOW LESS ORGANIZED INTEREST IN THEIR LANGUAGE THAN DO OTHER ETHNIC GROUPS, AS EVIDENCED BY COMPARING NEWSPAPER PUBLICATIONS IN DIFFERENT MOTHER TONGUES, RADIO LANGUAGE PROGRAMS, AND LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE ASSOCIATIONS WHERE, IN EACH CASE, OTHER LANGUAGES OUTDISTANCE PROPORTIONATELY THE SAME ACTIVITIES IN ITALIAN. MORE STUDENTS AND TEACHERS OF ITALIAN THAN THOSE OF OTHER MAJOR COMMONLY TAUGHT LANGUAGES ARE "APPROPRIATE ETHNICS" (ONE WHOSE PARENT(S) OR GRANDPARENT(S) ARE OR WERE NATIVE SPEAKERS OF THE LANGUAGE UNDER CONSIDERATION), WHO ASSOCIATE THE LANGUAGE WITH PEOPLE, FOOD, AND DAILY LIFE RATHER THAN WITH MORE ELEVATED LINGUISTIC OR LITERARY CONCEPTS. THE FUTURE OF ITALIAN SEEMS TO BE ONLY GREATER DE-ETHNIZATION, LESS FAMILIARITY ON THE PART OF THE INDIVIDUAL WITH HIS REGIONAL ITALIAN, AND FEWER STUDENTS OF THE LANGUAGE AS THEIR "ITALIANNES" RECEDES FURTHER INTO THE BACKGROUND BECAUSE OF A HIGHER SOCIO-ECONOMIC LEVEL AND A MORE URBAN-AMERICAN WAY OF LIFE. THIS SPEECH WAS DELIVERED AT THE ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS OF ITALIAN, CHICAGO, DECEMBER 27-29, 1965. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN THE "FLORIDA FL REPORTER," VOLUME 4, NUMBER 3, SPRING 1966. (SS)

ITALIAN LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE EFFORTS IN THE UNITED STATES AND THE TEACHER OF ITALIAN IN AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES

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Invited Address prepared for the Open Meeting of the 1965 annual conference of the American Association of Teachers of Italian held in Chicago, Illinois, December 27-29, 1965.

One of the major realities that must be faced by teachers of Italian in the United States is very seldom discussed, namely, that more of them and more of their students are "appropriate ethnics" than is the case for teachers or students of any other major "foreign" language (French, Spanish, German, Russian) currently offered in American high schools or colleges. ("Appropriate ethnics" are individuals, one or more of whose parents or grandparents, are or were native speakers of some variant of any language under consideration). I submit that this reality itself—as well as the fact that it has been studiously ignored—must be better understood if Italian instruction in the United States is to become more fully aware of some of its major and unique assets as well as its major and unique problems.

Mother Tongue Maintenance Among Italo-Americans

In conjunction with my recent study of the non-English language resources of American immigrant ethnic groups* I estimated that in 1960 there were 3,673,141 first, second and third or subsequent generation Americans with some variant of Italian as their mother tongue. Comparable figures for Spanish were 3,335,961; for German, 3,145,772; for Polish, 2,184,936; for French, 1,043,220; for Yiddish, 964,605. If my estimates were correct, Italian was the most frequent non-English mother tongue in the United States in 1960. If my estimates were off somewhat and if that distinction belonged to Spanish instead, then it still remains true that Italian is indubitably one of the major non-English mother tongues in the United States today from the point of view of the number of its mother tongue claimants. Nevertheless, the claimants of Italian mother tongue in the United States are far less noteworthy

when we come to consider their *organized efforts* on behalf of their mother tongue.

Only five Italian dailies were being published in the United States in 1960 as compared to six in Spanish and six in Polish.(1) Their combined circulation was roughly 133,000, this figure being less than that of dailies published in Spanish, Polish or Yiddish. If we add all mother tongue publications together (i.e., dailies, tri-weeklies, semi-weeklies, weeklies, bi-weeklies, etc.) the total for Italian, namely, 26, is surpassed by the totals for German, Spanish, Polish and Hungarian and is *almost* equalled by the totals for such numerically weaker groups as Ukrainian and Czech.(2) Furthermore, both the number and circulation of Italian mother tongue publications in the USA dropped much more sharply in the period 1950-1960 than was the case for mother tongue publications in the other languages mentioned above (Spanish, German, Polish, Hungarian, Ukrainian and Czech) — in some of which either number or circulation or both increased in this period (e.g., Spanish, Ukrainian, Polish).(3)

In the realm of radio broadcasting the relative position of Italian is somewhat better — Italo-Americans obviously being more attuned to the spoken word than to the printed page—but even here Italian efforts are dwarfed by those in Spanish for which there are 60% more stations and *six times* as many hours on the air.(4) Interestingly enough, of the "big five" languages in "foreign" language broadcasting in the USA in 1960 (Spanish, Italian, Polish, German and French), far fewer directors of Italian programs indicated a major interest in preserving or strengthening the Italian language and culture in the United States than was true in the cases of program-directors for the other four major languages. (5)

The above finding is undoubtedly related to such other facts as the fol-

lowing: Italian is proportionately less frequently taught in Catholic schools or in independent, ethnically supported language schools than is Spanish, French or Polish. (6) The proportion of sermons in Italian is lower in Italian "national" parishes than it is in Roman Catholic parishes defined as Spanish, Polish, French, Hungarian or Slovak (only to mention other predominantly Roman Catholic immigrant ethnic groups).(7) Finally, there are exceedingly few language maintenance organizations among Italo-Americans and the few that do exist are weak in membership, funds and influence.

Are Italo-Americans Linguistically Apathetic?

The above facts require — indeed they beg for — explanation and interpretation. Why should Italo-Americans show less organized interest in their language than do other, frequently less numerous, immigrant-derived ethnic groups in the United States? Different answers undoubtedly apply, depending on the specific other groups with whom they may be compared. Thus, Italo-Americans are generally of pre-World War I (or immediate post-World War I) origin and thus have had 30 more years in which to become Anglicized than have the more recent Spanish-speaking immigrants from Mexico, Puerto Rico and Cuba.

However, if we compare Italo-Americans with Polish-Americans, Ukrainian-Americans and several other Southern or Eastern European immigrant groups who arrived in the United States at roughly the same time, the Italians still appear backward in connection with organized "in-group" language maintenance efforts. Certainly this cannot be attri-

(5) Fishman, J. A., et al. *op.cit.* Table 4.11, p. 87.

(6) Fishman, J. A., and Nahirny, V. C., "The Ethnic Group School and Mother Tongue Maintenance in the United States." *Sociology of Education*, 1964, 37, 306-317.

(7) Fishman, J. A., et al. *op.cit.* Table 6.8, p. 135.

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Dean Fishman is the recipient of many awards and honors and author of some three dozen articles. His articles often reflect interest in language, bi-lingualism, language learning, and the languages of minority groups.

Two important works: *Yiddish in America and Language Loyalty in the United States* (soon to appear in book form.) The latter contains Readings in the Sociology of Language.

*Fishman, Joshua A. — *Language Loyalty in the United States/The Hague*, Mouton, 1965. The estimates of mother tongue claimants discussed below are shown in Table 2, 3, p. 42.

(1) Fishman, J. A., et al. *op.cit.* Table 3.2, p. 53

(2) Fishman, J. A., et al. *op.cit.* Table 3.7, p. 59

(3) Fishman, J. A., et al. *op.cit.* Tables 3.7 and 3.8, pp. 59-60

(4) Fishman, J. A., et al. *op.cit.* Table 4.2, p. 77

buted to overly rapid social mobility and urban-suburban diffusion, for this has not occurred among Italo-Americans. Italian neighborhoods have held up rather well in most American cities. Although Italo-Americans have certainly experienced a noticeable degree of social mobility, they have not tended to leave the neighborhoods in which their parents settled to the same extent as have the socially mobile children of Jewish, Polish, Ukrainian or Hungarian parents. Indeed, there seems to be more Italian spoken in these neighborhoods than one would predict on the basis of newspaper circulation, language school enrollment, radio programming, organizational activity, etc.

If Italo-Americans are linguistically apathetic this would seem to be so primarily with respect to modern, organized efforts under their own auspices and control. The localism and regionalism that characterized them as immigrants is still pronounced in many neighborhoods and distance from standard Italian often remains astonishingly great. Whatever organized ethnic activity there is tends to flow more in the direction of social and familial undertakings (sometimes under religious and sometimes under political auspices) than it does in cultural or nationalistic directions. All in all, the "Italianness" of Italo-Americans still reflects their immigrant status as well as the heightened linguistic and cultural parochialism or localism that has continued to mark much of Italy itself to this very day. "Italianness" underwent very little if any ideologization in the United States, very little if any "nationalization," very little if any ideological or symbolic elaboration. Being Italian remained (and remains) associated with people and with other tangibles and particulars, with family, with neighborhood, with foods and celebrations—rather than with ideas or ideologies or symbols such as mission and history and art and theatre and literature.

The Italian student and the Italian teacher are both *reflections* of, and *reactions* against, this state of affairs in Italian-American communities.

The Image of Italian in American High Schools and Colleges

French and Spanish are *studied* primarily by students who are *not* themselves of French or Spanish extrac-

tion. These languages are usually taught by teachers who are also not "appropriate ethnics."⁽⁸⁾ The image of the French language in the minds of pupils and teachers alike is that of culture, refinement, and, at times, effeminacy. The image of the Spanish language—at least until lately—was one of countries that are "good neighbors south of the border" and, at times, one of masculinity. Both French and Spanish stand for ideas, values. They are not "ethnically infused." They do not remind most students or teachers of themselves, their parents, or other people whom they know.

German and Italian, on the other hand, are studied primarily by "appropriate ethnics" and, what is more, their teachers are also "appropriate ethnics." German, however, has also been ideologized. Its image has been depersonalized, defamilialized — perhaps because German mass settlement in the United States is a matter of comparatively early history and perhaps because German-Americans would rather not think about themselves as Germans. German stands for science, for learning, for *dichter* and *denker*. German represents an "ethnically infused" language emptied, perforce, of ethnic content and academically sterilized.

By contrast with German antisepsis Italian is alive and jumping. Italian is life. Italian is people. Italian is you and me and our parents, and our uncles and our aunts and our cousins and our grandparents. Italian is people arguing and singing and eating. Students study it because their parents use it, and because they think they already know it, and because the parochial school didn't teach it, and because the parish doesn't teach it. In short, the image of Italian is plebeian, almost unlettered, and ethnically saturated from end to end. Few students ideologize Italian before, during or after their academic exposure to it.

The Reaction of the Italian Teacher

The Italian teacher (particularly at the high school level) is often faced by an uncomfortable dilemma. He is the instructor of a "non-academic language" in an academic setting. He knows the folksy familiarity of Italo-Americans toward their na-

tive speech all too well, for part of him shares that view. He knows that standard Italian seems strange and stilted to many of his students and to most of their parents. In part he would like Italian to achieve the universal stature of French. In part he considers French lifeless in contrast to Italian. In part he would like to lift his students above their rustic ethnicity into the higher realms of Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio and others. In part this strikes him as selling his own birthright for self-alienation. In part he is chagrined that the Italo-American community does not show greater interest in and support for Italian (so that there might be more students, more endowed chairs, more prizes, more subsidized publications, etc.) He often feels himself to be a rejected or unappreciated leader, a bringer of light whose flock has chosen coarse vulgarity over the light that he has to offer. In part he feels that Italian is already too identified with the daily life and human foibles of Italians and Italo-Americans and he frequently wishes that they would all recede into the background and only the melodic beauty of the language itself would remain.

The Future?

What of the future? Italian will probably undergo increasing de-ethnization — at least to the extent of German if not to the extent of French — as the years go by. Italo-Americans will slowly but surely reach even higher rungs in the urban-American socio-economic ladder. Regional Italian will become more and more unfamiliar to them. If fewer of their children will study it in high school or college those that will do so will view it with the respect due a long-departed and virtuous figure. Italian will have finally "arrived" psychologically — for it will appear to be dignified and appreciated — but the Italo-American as we know him now will have vanished. *Gesellschaft* and propriety will once more have triumphed over *Gemeinschaft* and intimacy. It is quite possible that, all things considered, the teacher of Italian will be no happier then than he is now. Italians are never really happy with formality and propriety and detachment. Thus, the teacher of Italian may even look back on 1965 as being in the "good old days," when students identified Italian with wonderful people, real people, warm-hearted people, people like you and me.

(8) Fishman, J. A., and Hayden, R. G. — The impact of exposure to ethnic mother tongues on foreign language teachers in American high schools and colleges. *Modern Language Journal*, 1964, 48, 262-274.